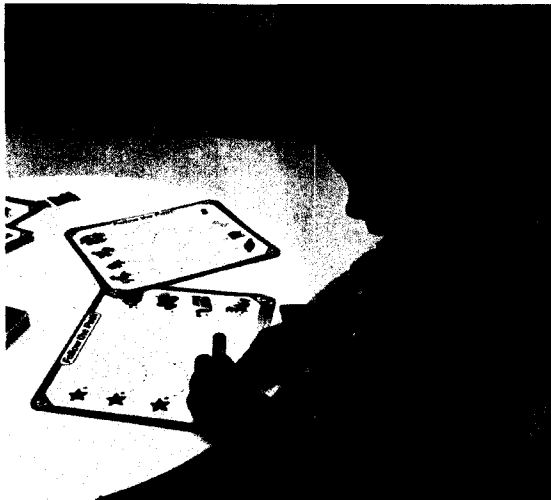


# MONTANA SCHOOL *for the* Deaf & Blind

*"Giving kids the building blocks to independence"*

Report for the Education Appropriations Subcommittee

January 31, 2011



*Education, Communication, Independence for Life*

**1. Obligations under state law require MSDB to:**

(A) serve as a residential and day school for children and adolescents who because of their vision or hearing loss cannot be successfully taught and are unable to receive an appropriate education in the public schools.

(B) serve as a consultative resource for parents of children with vision or hearing loss not yet enrolled in an educational program as well as public schools where they are enrolled, and to ensure that services and programs for these children are appropriate.

(C) establish a system for tracking children identified with vision or hearing loss from the time of identification through the child's exit from intervention or educational services.

Campus Program

For 55 students the on-campus education program at MSDB provides the LRE "Language Rich Environment," and "Least Restrictive Environment," with skilled staff and specialized services needed to meet their educational needs. Because of the differing educational needs of the deaf and blind, MSDB operates two small schools with multi-age, multi-grade classrooms serving students preschool through post high school. The 19 teachers and seven support specialists utilize multiple modes of communication, specialized equipment, adapted curriculum, and specialized instructional skill sets to provide comprehensive individualized education for each student. Along with having teachers with specialized training in the education of the deaf or the blind, the school complies with the same mandates as other public schools to provide highly qualified teachers in the content areas of English, math, science and social studies.

With the exception of once-a-month travel weekends and holidays, the student services program operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week during the school year. Trained staff provide supervision of students during the afterschool, nighttime, and weekend hours ensuring student care and safety as well as the development of social, leisure and independent living skills. Appropriate programming is provided by age and gender. Staff work with students on an individual basis to apply the skills they learn in the classroom to the activities of daily living. And along with the recreational activities supervised on campus many of the residential students participate in social and recreational activities in the community. These

included extra curricular athletics, youth sports leagues, Eagle Mount recreation programs, 4-H, and local art center programs. Some of the unique services and recent accomplishments of the on-campus program include:

- Preschool services that focuses on communication, mobility, and early language learning for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and visually impaired children.
- Disability specific accommodations including Braille and American Sign Language, and instructional strategies that help students develop reading and math skills sufficient to support their post high school transition plans. In reading 60% of all students tested and in math 59% of students tested with Measures of Academic Progress <sup>(1)</sup> are on track (1 or more RIT) to meet their growth targets for the year. For elementary students 50% made significant growth (4 or more RIT) in reading and 39% (4 or more RIT) made significant growth in math.
- Transition programming for post high school students to develop independent life skills from the expanded core curriculum, orientation and mobility, Braille or American Sign Language, written language, and vocational based skills. The percentage of graduates who have participated in the transition program has increase from 29% in 2005 to 81% in 2010.
- On-campus educational evaluations for 21 students from local districts.
- Assistance with development of transition and behavior plans for 41 students from local districts.
- Audiological evaluations for 214 children.

### Outreach Program

MSDB's outreach consultants are based in 12 communities throughout the state, serving children and youth in over 100 school districts and preschools. Our consultants work with local school districts, parents, and other members of the educational team to plan appropriate academic programs for students with vision and hearing loss, wherever they may live. Currently MSDB outreach is tracking 474 children ages birth through 22 who are at risk of, or are served in special education because of eligibility as a child with a hearing or vision loss. Six full-time and one part-time consultant serve 261 visually impaired or deaf-blind students and five full time and three part-time consultants serve 213 deaf or hard of hearing students.

<sup>(1)</sup> RIT stands for Rasch unIT, which is a unit of measure that uses individual item difficulty values to estimate student achievement. RIT scores create an equal-interval scale. The RIT scale is used to measure how "tall" a student is on the curriculum scale and scores can be compared to tell how much growth a student has made, similar to measuring height on a yard-stick. This score is independent of the age or grade of the student, and reflects the instructional level at which the student is currently performing.

The Family Advisor Program helps parents address the unique learning needs of their deaf or blind infant or preschool age child, including speech and language development, spatial and concept development, and mobility skills. Sixty-five children being tracked are younger than three years of age. Consultants have an average caseload of 36 children of whom 24 are a service level two or greater. Service level two typically includes bimonthly contacts with the education team and family, support for the development of annual education plans and, regular in-service training for staff.

- The outreach staff also organizes and runs 6 enrichment activities on campus that bring students, families, school personnel, and other professionals together during the year and in the summer for training and to provide opportunities for networking and sharing ideas and experiences. Last year these activities had 348 participants.
- Last year the outreach staff provided 70 training sessions with 1682 participants and 792 contacts with professionals outside of the schools.
- Services through MSDB's Family advisor program increased from 28 in 2005 to 41 in 2010.

### Tracking

MSDB has a collaborative agreement with Children's Special Health Services (DPHHS) to utilize the Children's Health Referral Information System (CHRIS) to manage referrals and data from school districts, the Hearing Conservation Program, Part C and other service providers, and families. For infants and toddlers MSDB works collaboratively with service providers to ensure that educational interventions are in place within 6 months of identification of a vision or hearing loss. Through regular comprehensive surveys MSDB consultants also identify unmet program needs for students to assist local schools in planning and to help clarify MSDB's role in meeting those needs. In the local districts:

- Fifty Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (D/HH) students need direct instruction from a teacher of the D/HH and 12 should have services of an interpreter. Twenty-three students do not have appropriate access to their peers and 9 are not included in extra curricular activities.
- One-hundred and nine visually impaired (VI) need instruction from a teacher of the VI, 70 need Orientation and Mobility services, and potentially 14 students are receiving instruction in Braille by an instructor who does not meet state standards. Thirty-two students do not have appropriate access to their peers and 56 are not included in extra curricular activities.
- Only four districts employ trained teachers of the deaf and three districts employ trained teachers of the blind.

## **2. Budget Reduction of 5% With No Vacancy Savings Assessment**

The effects of the January 11th global amendment by this committee to reduce agency budgets by 5% results in a reduction of 3.27 FTE (\$217,875) and a 1% reduction (\$73,905) in the operating budget for MSDB. The resulting reduction in FTE would include the possible elimination of one half-time teaching position, one full-time and 2 half-time outreach consultants in the education program and one full-time nightwatch/Licensed Practical Nurse, and one full-time Cottage Life Attendant.

A 1% cut in the operating budgets for the general services and education programs would result in a 46% reduction in funds spent on repair and maintenance of the buildings and grounds and a 50% reduction in the purchase of supplies and materials including textbooks and other educational supplies. (In the current biennium the half-time teaching and full-time nightwatch/LPN and CLA positions have been held vacant to help the school achieve the 4% vacancy savings requirement assessed against these two programs.) A 5% reduction would potentially have the following effects on programs and services:

- The school's ability to accept students with instructional needs that are significantly different from the students currently enrolled would be limited.
- More students would be placed in multi-grade classrooms reducing their opportunity for individualized instruction identified in their education plans.
- Replacement of textbooks, reference materials, and purchase of classroom supplies would be deferred resulting in less effective classroom instruction.
- Opportunities for professional development and improvements in curriculum and instruction identified in the school improvement plan would be reduced or eliminated.
- The school's ability to accept additional students into the residential program, if they were significantly younger than those currently enrolled or if they had additional health care needs that require nighttime nursing care, would be limited.
- Outreach caseloads would increase from an average of 35 to 42 students resulting in a reduction in the frequency of service to families and school districts making it harder for teachers to meet the needs of their students.
- MSDB would not be able to provide as many outreach supported enrichment activities for students or training activities for local school districts, Part C/Headstart providers, medical or community based service providers.

Referrals for evaluation and placement have increased by 25% and 7% respectively over the past two years. And though the numbers are small, the enrollment in the transition program has doubled since 2008.

### **3. 5% Reduction with a Continued 4% Vacancy Savings Assessment**

The school would need to reduce the personal service budget by an additional \$225,000. Under this scenario the school could only meet a vacancy savings requirement by holding three additional teaching positions or two additional outreach positions open. Additionally two cottage life attendant positions would need to remain vacant. Reductions of this level in the campus program could have the following impacts:

- Additional students would be need to be placed into multi-grade classrooms and at least 12 students currently enrolled would have to return to their local school requiring a change in placement under their IEPs. Students attend MSDB because this placement is the Least Restrictive and most appropriate. A change in placement can only be made by the IEP team which includes the parents. If the parents or the local district do not concur with the change, under the rights of due process "Stay Put" can be invoked which would require MSDB to continue providing services for these students.
- One of the cottages would be closed drastically reducing the quality programming for residential students and presenting concerns for both student safety and social well being. Students ages six through 19 or 20 years of age would potentially be placed in the same cottage resulting in an inappropriate social environment. In addition, having a wing with such a wide variety of ages may cause parents to be reluctant about placing their child in the residential program.

Or:

- Two outreach positions would be held vacant and caseloads would increase to 51 students with 35 requiring level 2 services or greater. Consultants would only be able to provide services at about 60% of the current level to students, families and schools.
- Because nearly all local districts lack special education teachers with specific training in the area of deafness or blindness, they would have difficulty meeting the needs of their students. In turn this could increase the number of student referrals for placement at MSDB.

Because the state has an obligation to provide the LRE option for placement at MSDB all reductions needed to meet the vacancy savings requirement in the education program would have to be taken from the outreach staff. It just is not possible to hold additional teaching positions vacant and maintain the ability to provide K-12 curriculum that meets the basic system of quality education for students on campus.

#### **4. Governor's Proposed Budget**

In consideration of the school's 24 hour residential program and wide reaching purposes under the statute, the Governor's budget proposal recommends reductions of 1.25 FTE; 0.75 in the Education Program and 0.5 in the Student Services Program. This reduction in personnel is significantly less than the 4% originally requested by the OBPP. However, the loss of this FTE will result in less service to students served both on campus, and through outreach. And the negative impact of any reduction in FTE will be even worse if vacancy savings continues to be assessed against these two programs.

Overall the Governor's budget proposal provides a level of funding that maintains the current level of staffing, programs, and services with an overall increase in total funds over the base year FY2010 of 1.98% which covers present law adjustments. There are no new proposals in this budget.

#### **5. Summary**

The bottom line is this; regardless of where deaf or blind children live or attend school any reduction in the staff at MSDB will result in less availability of the educational expertise needed by deaf and blind children to receive appropriate access to curriculum and instruction, development of communication and language, specialized support services, early intervention home-based programs, parent support and advocacy, consultation and technical assistance, support for social and emotional development, life skills, transition, and vocational training. All of these services are necessary for deaf and blind children to develop their communication, language, and vocational skills and self-help and independence to their fullest potential.